

# **How To Lead By Putting Your People First**

**by Barbara Sanfilippo**

*The way your employees feel is the way your customers are going to feel.*

-Karl Albrecht

Isn't that the truth? Dissatisfied or unhappy employees tend to deliver poor service. Happy employees tend to deliver good service. Sound simple? Then why don't we have more happy employees?

Many of us are caught up with planning, profitability, technology, marketing and customer satisfaction. Often we lose sight of the fact that our people are our most valuable asset. Without committed, loyal and motivated employees, any service program or major initiative is doomed to failure. In our rush to improve our service and satisfy our riders, have we forgotten the importance of our staff?

An enlightened company understands that every individual it employs seeks job satisfaction. Communications becomes a key tool in letting your people know where and how they stand with your company. Meetings, appraisals and newsletters all contribute to informing the employee.

## **COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY**

John Bartosiewicz with Fort Worth Transportation Authorities strongly believes, "If you want to get staff buy-in and commitment to any change or project, hold a series of smaller meetings to communicate effectively. It's important to listen to their concerns and have a dialogue, not just a prepared speech." With over 500 employees, John felt this more intimate format has significantly improved communications at Fort Worth Transportation Authorities

One of my past clients, Mike Maslak became president/CEO of San Diego's North Island Federal Credit Union. He developed a fiercely loyal and dedicated management team that has led to financial success. In sharing his secret for leading the cultural change, Mike says, "Focusing on employee satisfaction and developing a people-based management team has been very successful for us. All of our key financial ratios exceed industry peer performance. By utilizing focus groups, surveys and improved communications, service and employee morale have been measured at an all-time high."

Transit general managers who ride with bus operators, visit with the mechanics and listen to their concerns are leading by example. John Wilson of Citibus has monthly informal roundtable meetings with a small group of his staff to share the vision, answer questions and listen to their concerns. This popular format has helped John to win the respect and trust of his people.

## **PEOPLE FIRST ACTION STEPS**

Many top-quality service organizations have identified staff satisfaction and development as a priority and back this up with action steps in their strategic plans. Reference to your employee

well-being should be included in your mission statement and backed up with action.

Many options exist for creating a *people first* atmosphere. Consider the following:

- **Climate Surveys** - Anonymous climate surveys or "employee report cards" are a key factor in developing a *people first* company. Surveys with comments demonstrate you're interested in listening to staff concerns and in solving problems.

A climate survey we conducted for McDonald Transit Associates, Springs Transit and Citibus identified several areas of concerns of their managers and employees. Larry Heil is an excellent example of a leader who is open to feedback and suggestions from his managers. By communicating the results at a staff retreat and breaking into small discussion groups, we were able to get feedback and brainstorm solutions.

- **Project Teams** - Leaders seek to get their staff involved and participating on teams. As a result of our retreat, John Wilson of Citibus created several action teams to work on issues such as standards, internal service and terminals and training. Mary Ann Jackson of Pierce Transit also has extensive teams in place such as : Highway To Health, Quality Improvement Project and the RTA Employees Communication Committee.

- **Training and Development** - By investing in our people, we are investing in our future success. Our staff is hungry for opportunities to attend classes and seminars. If budget is tight consider hiring a presenter/consultant and splitting costs. By coordinating their schedules the same week, I was able to conduct a climate survey review and staff retreat for both Springs Transit and Citibus. Pierce Transit offers an internship in their planning department to bud operators and customer service reps. This goes a long way to building future leaders.

- **Self-Management** - Employee-focused organizations require confident management that is open to delegating decisions downward. Leaders give responsibility and support and then get out of the way.

- **Praise and Recognition** - Concentrate on what is done right. Most organizations tend to give feedback only when something goes wrong. Use "on the spot" rewards, such as lottery tickets and coupons to give instant praise.

- **Employee Appreciation Day** - Designate a day or week to honor your people and say thank you for their hard work. The key to success is getting the General Manager and all management actively involved. Have senior and mid-level managers spend the day praising employees, delivering gifts, hosting parties and filling in at work stations.

- **Lighten Up** - Happy people are more productive at work. Use cartoons and humorous memos to communicate information. Encourage the use of skits, music and games at staff meetings. Celebrate as much as possible.

- **As leaders let's not forget we have the privilege and honor of serving our staff.**

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